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The lesson of the hostages

Quiet diplomacy worked

By Michael D'Antonio

One year ago the Iranian hostage crisis gripped America. Every step of the hostages' return to freedom was presented on television and viewed by a nation transfixed by the conclusion of the ordeal.

But as we mark the anniversary of its resolution, nearly all of the players in that drama have returned to normal life. The strange names of Iranian leaders have faded from the front pages. And there are few who ponder the lessons of the crisis.

American officials learned to rely on quiet, back-stage, third-party diplomacy, and a nonaligned Third World nation, to bring the 52 Americans home. Edmund S. Muskie, who was Secretary of State when the deadlock was resolved, says that strategy may prove to be a landmark in U.S. foreign policy.

"I can't recall any time in recent history when the United States worked in that way with a smaller country that wasn't a traditional ally," Mr. Muskie said in a recent interview.

An intermediary was brought into the negotiations after a series of U.S. moves to isolate Iran economically and to put nearly every nation in the world on record against the hostage-taking.

However, the first go-between was West Germany, and the Iranians soon grew suspicious. The Europeans were too closely aligned with the United States, they decided, so another dealmaker had to be found.

As Mr. Muskie, now in private law practice in Washington, recalls, Algeria then approached both parties. "They saw an opportunity to be helpful and to demonstrate their abilities as diplomats," Mr. Muskie said. An Islamic nation that was born of a revolt against French colonists, Algeria was respected by the mullahs and revolutionaries. Iran trusted the negotiators from Algiers and the United States demonstrated uncharacteristic flexibility by accepting help from a nonaligned Islamic state.

"The probability of a resolution was enormously enhanced when the Algerians came in, because then Iran didn't have to deal with the U.S. ['The Great Satan'] directly and we didn't have to deal directly with them," adds the former Maine senator.

The Algerians were also skillful interpreters, casting each party's position in the best light. "Farsi is a very imprecise language," Mr. Muskie said. "There were many times when the Algerians were able to resolve impasses simply though skillful interpretation."

And the lag in communications that a middleman created actually eased tensions on both sides. "It gave us time to consider what had gone before and a legitimate explanation for delays," Mr. Muskie said.

"We avoided dead ends. Say we had taken Iran's proposal to release the hostages for $24 billion seriously. The process would have broken down right there. Instead we showed restraint. Some may have said that was a sign of weakness for America. I think it was a sign of maturity."

A more practical lesson of Iran might be found in the U.S. intelligence breakdown that preceded the embassy takeover by a mob of militants. "The shah resisted American intelligence activities within Iran. We did not have our own sources," says the former secretary. "Our own sources would have been most useful."

Because U.S. officials relied on the Iranian government, they didn't get a true reading of the revolutionary mood of Iran's populace. Even though the embassy had been attacked once before, U.S. officials did not expect a takeover by the exiled religious leaders or another attack on the American diplomatic compound.

When he took over the State Department for Cyrus Vance, in the spring of 1980, following a rescue attempt of the hostages that ended in disaster in the Iranian desert, Mr. Muskie found the information flowing from Iran had been inadequate. "The state of our intelligence in Iran was not equal to the challenge," he explained, "especially prior to the takeover."

U.S. policy evolved as the hostage crisis dragged on. In the beginning an outraged President Carter conducted much of the American response in open forums, denouncing the Iranians and demanding the release of the Americans.

Public tirades were followed by appeals to the United Nations and the World Court. When U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim's mission to Iran fell apart, Mr. Carter approved the rescue attempt that failed. Mr. Muskie took over the State Department at a time when the country was shaken by the failed rescue attempt and frustrated by American's apparent impotence.

The American side became more innovative under Mr. Muskie, toning down the public rhetoric and pursuading allies to join economic sanctions. Eventually, this determined but quiet policy persuaded the Iranians that releasing their captives was the best thing they could do. Most of the nations of the world had condemned the revolutionaries, branding the hostage-taking a terrorist act. All this was achieved by American diplomats who worked out of the view of cameras and microphones.

The Iran experience may shape the way the United States responds to similar critical situations in the future. With world terrorism running high, it would surprise few diplomats if another American embassy were stormed, and more hostages taken one day.

Mr. Muskie says the success of third-party negotiations under his direction may deter the use of force in future crises that the United States may face. "I think the way we handled it won us respect around the world," Mr. Muskie adds. Rather than a burly, muscle-flexing adolescent, the United States appeared to play the role of a patient, experienced world citizen.

When he went to Foggy Bottom for

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